

Hannah Cunningham
Senate Testimony
4/11/2023

Good afternoon everyone,

I am honored to be here with you today. My name is Hannah Cunningham. I am a junior in high school and have been looking into what I call the school building construction crisis for about a year now. I published an article on the repercussions of South Burlington's failed construction bond in VT Digger and started my own website called Build Up Vermont documenting schools across Vermont to raise awareness about the deteriorating conditions of the school buildings.

There are two different sections in bill H. 486, the first is the school construction issue and the second is the PCB issue. I propose the bill is separated into two bills.

Although there is overlap, these are fundamentally two different issues.

The school construction portion of the bill should not be held up if there is debate around the PCB section. School construction is extremely pressing and can't be put on hold as it has been for the past 16 years.

After Vermont suspended state construction funding for schools in 2007, through Acts and Resolves No. 52, Sec. 36, many schools across the state have struggled to rebuild their infrastructure as it falls apart due to monetary constraints.

The majority of Vermont's schools were built in the 1950s and 1960s. Because of this, we are facing a statewide issue as many of the buildings are deteriorating at the same time.

Section 1 creates the School Construction Aid Task Force to examine, evaluate, and report on issues relating to school construction aid. This is great but more needs to be done at a more urgent pace. Specifically, the bill should include a clause requiring the task force to submit their suggestions for a plan of action.

I am going to show you some of the many things this task force is going to find using two different schools as examples.

The main problems I have identified are a lack of space and unsafe systems.

The rural school of Danville could not afford the \$70 million needed for essential repairs. One example of this is the main electrical panel that was built in 1969. If one part breaks, the entire

school will lose electricity and the whole electrical system will have to be removed because it is too old to fix.



This is a smaller electrical panel demonstrating another problem with their electrical system. You can see here the cubbies around it. These electrical panels are easy to get into creating a hazard.



Another problem with Danville is the lack of space. Here you can see the Spanish and French classrooms in an oversized closet – note the lack of windows and ventilation. Here you can see a guidance counselor's office in a closet.



13-year student Lilli Klark spent years sitting in hallways and her car during study halls. This is one of the closets she would retreat to get her work done quietly. She decided that for her senior project she would build study spaces for the high schoolers. The only problem: there is no space.

In rural towns, such as Danville, the deteriorating building affects not only the students but the community as well.

Principal David Shilling explained one unique tradition. “Every year all of the maple syrup producers get together and have dinner and talk about their upcoming sugaring season...[they] have this community dinner before they go off to their individual sugar houses.”

This is a good example of how the school is the heartbeat of the town. However, the small tax base cannot afford the \$70 million dollar bond required to fix the basic construction needs.

South Burlington faces a similar situation. Their 209.6 million bond to address construction issues and accommodate growth failed in 2020. The school lacks sprinklers, the students are eating in hallways, many of the classrooms are out of compliance with the ADA and the school needs more space for students.



Here are some of the many tables in the hallway that students sit at during lunch because the cafeteria does not have enough space.



Here is the South Burlington lobby during lunch. Again, more overflow from the cafeterias that do not have space.



The photo to the right shows students eating lunch underneath the stairwell because of a lack of space in the cafeteria. See the photo on the left from 1962 for comparison.

There needs to be a greater and faster call to action. This is not a project that can be drawn out for a significant amount of time. Kids are going through these schools right now. If we want to draw families into Vermont we need strong school systems. If we want kids growing up in Vermont to stay and participate in our workforce we need strong school buildings. In the long run, taking action urgently will have a greater impact on not just Vermont's students and families, but the economy. This should be a first-priority issue and it should not be drawn out.

Thank you for having me today!